

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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One never knows when the bonds of friendship will bind a millstone to his neck.

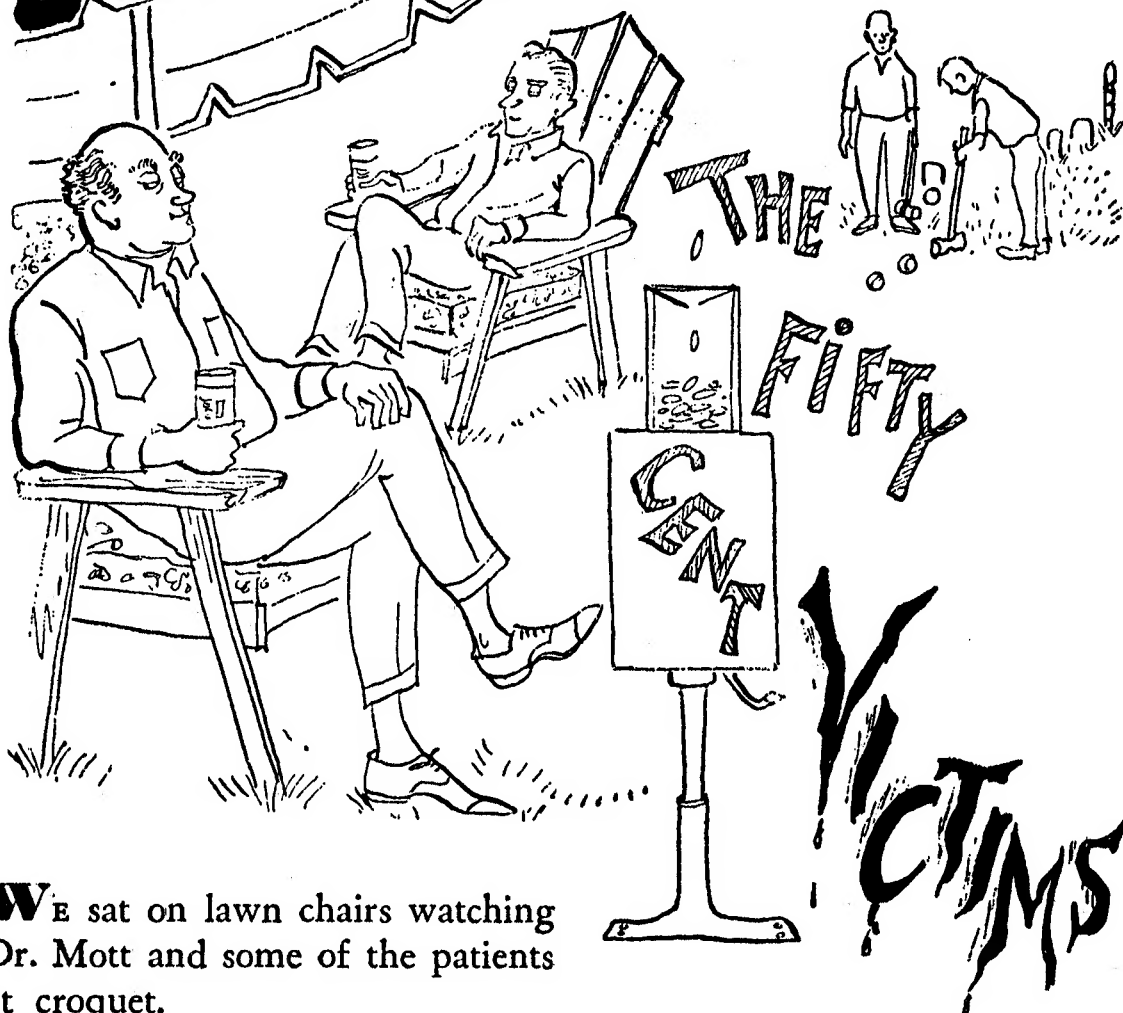


by
JACK RITCHIE

place like this? You can't like it."

He sipped some lemonade. "It's quite pleasant here. I have guaranteed food and unlimited leisure."

"Frankly, an attitude like that is



WE sat on lawn chairs watching Dr. Mott and some of the patients at croquet.

"Clarke," I said, "why do you allow yourself to be confined to a

not normal. Surely you assume it."

"But I'm not normal. I happen to be insane. Just as you are."

"But you don't *look* insane."

He smiled patiently. "Alfred, it doesn't matter *how* one looks." He tapped the side of his head with a forefinger. "It's all in what is or what isn't up here that counts. I happen to be completely amoral in the matter of human life. I could kill anyone without the slightest qualm."

I had been working on Clarke for several weeks now, always to this point. Now I went further. "Clarke, I've heard you say that before, but personally I just don't believe you at all. I think you're here on false pretenses."

He frowned. "I am *not*."

"Yes, you *are*." I got out of my chair and walked away.

As I expected, Clarke came trotting after me. "I killed my cousin Homer without the slightest qualm."

"I doubt that. You weren't even arrested."

"That was because my idiot relatives framed me. They all claimed it was an accident."

I stopped walking. "Could you kill me in cold blood?"

He hesitated. "I'd rather not. Just because I'm a cold-blooded killer doesn't mean that I don't like to be liked. I've got too few

friends to go around being spend-thrift with their lives."

"Let me put it this way," I said. "Could you open a telephone book, pick a name at random, and kill that person?"

"Certainly," Clarke said. "I'd stake my life on it."

My smile exhibited disdain. "Words are cheap."

For a moment I feared that I might join his cousin Homer, but then Clarke drew himself up. "Let's find a telephone book."

"I believe there's one in Dr.



Mott's office," I said. "Let's see."

In the doctor's roomy, comfortable, and empty office, I went to the telephone book on a corner of his desk and opened it "at random." I removed a straight pin from my lapel and made a general pass in the direction of the tiny hole I had pricked earlier in the day and then handed the open book to Clarke. "What name did I stick?"

He read aloud. "Walsh, James P., 1372 W. Fox Lane."

There was silence.

I smiled thinly. "You hesitate? Now that we've gone this far, you're going to back out?"

"No," Clarke said, "It's just that there are some technical difficulties."

"Like getting out of here? But all you have to do is walk out of one of the gates. There are no locks here at Seaview."

"I don't mean that. But what about buying a gun? I don't have any money."

"You will find a knife much quieter."

"Well, then there's bus fare. Round trip. I'll need two dimes."

"You've been in here for some time, Clarke," I said. "The bus fare is now twenty-five cents each way." I handed him a half dollar.

He looked at the coin. "Couldn't I take a taxi?"

"No. The driver might remember and be able to identify you later, and I really wouldn't want you to get caught. You will take the bus to the end of the line and then walk approximately four blocks east. Wearing gloves, you will let yourself into the house, quietly cut James Walsh's throat, and immediately depart. I believe that one o'clock in the morning would be the ideal time. Everyone in the

house ought to be asleep, including the servants."

"How do you know he has servants?"

"It's a posh address."

"Wouldn't two a.m. be even better?"

"The buses stop running at one forty-five."

"How do you know . . ."

I glared at him. "Now look here, Clarke, are you or are you not going to go through with this?"

"Oh, sure," Clarke said. He glanced at his watch. "Well, if I'm going to be out tonight, I might as well put in a nap now."

When he was gone, I sat down in Dr. Mott's swivel chair and selected a cigar from the humidor. I blew smoke in the direction of the filing cabinets. They were locked, of course, but the doctor kept the keys in his desk drawer, and that was not.

Dr. Mott's Seaview Sanitarium houses thirty-two guest-patients. I had gone through their files, and Clarke had struck me as the ideal man for my purpose. I had cultivated his friendship.

Twelve years ago, during a family gathering, Clarke had stabbed his cousin Homer to death, but the relatives had evidently united in a common front and sworn that the entire incident had been an accident occurring during horseplay.

The authorities had been convinced. However, some six months later, Clarke's relatives had quietly put him away in Dr. Mott's institution.

I had been here eight months, as the result of the efforts of two nephews and one niece—each the issue of one of my three sisters—and the additional connivance of a certain Dr. Roberts. Collectively they had manufactured a number of imaginary incidents in which my behavior was deemed irrational and they had succeeded in having me committed under a state law which permits detention if at least three persons, one a physician, declare that the person in question "has mental illness, is in need of hospitalization and is irresponsible and dangerous to himself and others."

Their motive, of course, was money—in this instance, to gain control of my holdings via trusteeship. They had not yet accomplished the latter. The matter was still in the courts. However, it was only a question of time before they succeeded.

Dr. Mott appeared in the doorway, wiping sun-roused perspiration from his forehead.

"I've been watching your croquetting from the window," I said. "You have a magnificent flair for the game."

He flushed. "Really? I do try to devote a certain portion of the day to the game. One must try to remain at one's peak, you know."

I made a move to rise from his chair, but he held up a hand. "Just remain where you are. I'm on my way to a shower."

"One more moment of your time, please, Doctor," I said. "I would like to report the disappearance of my address book."

"Oh?" Mott said. "Well, you probably mislaid it somewhere. It ought to turn up in a day or two."

"I've searched my room thoroughly," I said, "and the book is nowhere. I have the firm suspicion that it has been stolen."

He frowned. "Now, Alfred, you know that I don't allow kleptomaniacs in here. Just one person like that can play hob with the morale of an entire sanitarium. Kleptomania is definitely out. You have simply misplaced your address book."

Later that afternoon, while Clarke was out of his room, I slipped inside and taped the address book I had never lost behind his dresser mirror.

Dinner that evening was excellent, as it always is in Dr. Mott's establishment. I watched TV until eight-thirty and then went in search of Bert Spaulding. Bert is a new attendant, a rather large man

and consistently surly, even nasty.

I finally found him soldiering in the furnace room and kicked the tilted chair from under him. He descended to the cement floor ungracefully and quickly.

Dr. Mott came to see me in the isolation cell the next morning before breakfast. "I'm sorry this happened, Alfred," he said, "but I was at the movies with my mother, and Mr. Peabody got all rattled and had you put in here. He just told me about it."

"That's quite all right," I said. "No hard feelings."

Dr. Mott clicked his tongue. "Now, Alfred, just what was this all about? Why did you attack poor Bert Spaulding? You frightened him half to death."

"He stole my address book," I said.

Mott rubbed his jaw. "Really? Do you have any proof?"

"No," I said. "I just *know* it. He *hates* me."

Dr. Mott sighed. "Now, Alfred, pull yourself together. We can't have any paranoiacs here. Their moroseness invariably dampens the spirits of the entire group."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," I said. "I might be mistaken about Spaulding."

He cheered up. "Of course. Now let's get upstairs to breakfast." He closed the cell door behind us.

"Nobody's been in that room in thirty-five years. Peabody had a devil of a time finding the key."

I hurried through breakfast, and then took Clarke by the arm and ushered him into the garden.

"Well?" I asked. "Did you kill Walsh?"

He nodded. "I think so."

"What do you mean you *think* so?"

"Well, I cut *somebody's* throat. You see, there was just a little bit of moonlight, and I couldn't see the face too well."

"Why didn't you turn on the lights?"

"What good would that have done? I don't know what James P. Walsh is supposed to look like anyway."

I conceded the point.

"It's a pretty big house," Clarke said. "I had to go through four empty bedrooms before I finally found anybody. I guess we'll find out if it was the real James P. Walsh when we get this afternoon's paper."

Clarke and I fetched paint supplies and set up our easels under the shade of an elm. I am doing a still life of a can of soup and Clarke is doing a by-the-numbers reproduction of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*.

Dr. Mott appeared at eleven o'clock and drew me aside. "The

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police were here. They wanted to talk to you. Naturally I couldn't allow them to."

"Why not?"

"My dear Alfred, after all you are a patient here, and from the legal point of view, helpless and not responsible. I told them that they'd have to get a court order, or whatever they do, before I would allow them to see you." He patted my shoulder. "Seaview protects its guests, and besides, they suddenly lost interest."

"Lost interest? Why?"

"Well, they wanted to know where you were between the hours of eleven and three a.m. this morning, and when I told them that you were under lock and key, they seemed satisfied. They think he was killed about one a.m. but they're allowing a leeway of two hours each way. Pretty sloppy pinpointing, don't you think?"

"Would you mind telling me just *who* was killed?"

"One of your nephews. James P. Walsh." Dr. Mott examined my painting critically. "Hasn't that been done before?"

I shook my head. "Not under that label."

My niece, Henrietta McComb, came to see me the next afternoon.

"Well, well," I said. "I haven't seen you since the lynching."

She studied me coldly. "I wonder if I am bringing you news when I say that James is dead."

I smiled. "Please send flowers in my name."

"He was murdered."

"I rather suspected he might go that way. Putting aside my personal prejudices and looking at it from a global point of view, he was still a nincompoop."

She did not deny that. "He was murdered at one o'clock yesterday morning."

"I gather that the police have not apprehended the murderer? If they had, I imagine you would mention it?"

"Yes," Henrietta said. "I would."

"Do they suspect anyone?"

She nodded grimly. "Me."

I smiled again. "Only you? What about dear nephew Freddie? It seems to me that he might also have a motive for killing James. After all, the fewer of you to plunder my estate, the larger will be the shares."

Her eyes were narrow. "I have the feeling that the hour of one a.m. was chosen with a degree of forethought. Freddie and I should have been in our respective homes alone and asleep and thereby without what you might call 'alibis'. Consequently, the police would suspect either, or both, of

us. It was very cleverly planned."

"And they don't suspect Freddie? And you don't either?"

"He happens to be in San Francisco visiting some of his friends. Besides, I know that Freddie doesn't have the courage to harm a fly." She glared at me. "I have the firm suspicion that you are behind all of this."

I smiled. "I sincerely would have liked to have been present when James terminated his existence, but has it ever occurred to you that someone outside the family might have been responsible? After all, James was not the most loved of individuals."

When she left, she was at least giving that idea some time.

After supper, Clarke and I took a stroll in the rose garden.

"Clarke," I said, "It takes considerable courage to parachute from an airplane, doesn't it?"

He agreed. "Especially if you're afraid of heights, or don't think jumping out of airplanes is very important anyway."

I nodded. "But the *true* test of courage is to jump out of the airplane the *second* time. The first time you did not actually know what to expect and this deficiency alone might account for your courage. But by the second jump, you *do* know what to expect, and if you are terrified and *still* jump,

you are truly the most magnificent example of raw—"

"Now wait a minute," Clarke said. "I'm not jumping out of any airplane."

I held up a hand. "The point I'm getting to, Clarke, is that you may have committed *one* murder, but the true test of your courage would be to *repeat* the process—now that you are fully aware of all that the action entails."

He frowned. "Frankly, I don't think that courage has anything to do with it, one way or the other."

I didn't either, but courage is a sensitive point with us males and I needed that peg for my next move. I laughed lightly. "You were terrified when you killed James Walsh, weren't you? Come now, admit it. That's why you wouldn't think of ever going through something like that again."

He drew himself up. "I was *not* terrified, and Walsh was *not* my first murder. You forget cousin Homer."

"Oh, that." I dismissed it. "I don't see how you could count the death of a relative as a *bona fide* cold-blooded murder. After all, the act was committed in a fit of heat, wasn't it?"

He nodded slowly. "I guess you're right."

"Of course." I checked to see

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that the straight pin was still in my lapel and then took him by the arm. "Let's take another stab at Dr. Mott's telephone book."

Five minutes later, when I handed him the open volume, he squinted at the small print. "Henrietta McComb?"

"That's the one," I said. "She probably lives in an apartment."

"What's the number?"

I almost told him, but caught myself in time. "You ought to be able to find that out in the lobby. The name plates are under the mailboxes, you know."

"The usual time? One a.m.?"

"No. You'd have a devil of a time trying to force one of those apartment doors, and you couldn't climb through a window. The apartment's on the fifth floor—I imagine. Simply ringing the door bell wouldn't do either. People are notoriously suspicious of strangers at their door at one a.m." I shook my head. "No, the best thing to do is to appear at ten in the morning and pose as a salesman, or serviceman, or poll taker, or something of that nature. You simply strike and then leave."

At nine the next morning, I gave Clarke bus fare and bade him goodbye. I felt a twinge of guilt as I watched him go—not for what he was about to do or for what I had tricked him into doing—but

rather for my self-preserving defense should something go wrong and Clarke be apprehended.

In that event, I had no doubt that he would immediately tell everything. He was far too ingenuous to evade a direct question or to take refuge behind the Fifth Amendment. So, should the eyes of the authorities be leveled at me, I would stoutly maintain that Clarke was an unmitigated liar. I would proffer the explanation that Clarke undoubtedly found—or stole—my address book and, like a normal inmate of an insane asylum, had used the entries as a guidepost for his outside expeditions.

Now I searched for Dr. Mott and had no difficulty in talking him into a morning at croquet.

Clarke reappeared at the sidelines shortly before lunch and beckoned to me. I finished my game and joined him.

"I told her I was an interior decorator," Clarke said, "and the owners of the building were going to redo all the apartments."

"Fine," I said. "Is she dead?"

"There was this chain across the opening in the doorway, but when I told her who I was, she unhooked it right away. Nobody seems to be afraid of interior decorators."

"And then you killed her?"

"First, I learned that her favorite color is lilac, and she showed me some cracked tile in the bathroom that she claimed was there when she moved in, but personally I think she was lying. *Then* I killed her."

The police came to Seaview again that afternoon with questions about me. Dr. Mott was able to assure them that I had not been out of his sight during the time Henrietta was presumed to have met her death.

I had a visitor two days later. It was Freddie.

"Ah," I said, "I see that something of interest has brought you back from California."

He nodded. "Uncle Alfred, I have never excelled in mathematics, and yet I am quite certain that two and two equal four."

"Quite right," I said, "if one refrains from philosophical mathematics."

Freddie was a rather small, mild-eyed man in his thirties, and frankly, I had rather liked him prior to my incarceration in Seaview.

He sighed. "Uncle, it is obvious to me that you are responsible for the demise of both James and Henrietta."

"I have perfect alibis."

"Naturally," Freddie said. "I would have expected that of you."

However, I presume that you have managed to hire some assassin?"

"I haven't a cent besides my monthly pin money."

"Undoubtedly you have found someone who accepts promissory notes." He studied me. "I suppose that now I'm next on your list?"

I said nothing, but I did smile.

He sighed again. "If it weren't for me, Uncle Alfred, you would be dead today."

"Oh? How is that?"

"When Henrietta and James originally approached me, their idea was to get rid of you the final, permanent way. However, I finally persuaded them that having you certified and sent here was quite sufficient. Personally, I didn't think you'd be too terribly unhappy in Seaview. After all, you never did care much for travel or conspicuous spending."

Freddie cleared his throat. "Uncle Alfred, I really do believe that I would be of much more use to you alive than dead. In other words, since I was responsible for getting you into Seaview, I think I can get you out of here and reunite you with your earthly possessions."

I regarded him suspiciously. "Do you intend going to the authorities and confessing your conspiracy against me?"

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"Well, no. That could lead to all kinds of messiness. I'll simply change my testimony, claiming that Henrietta exerted undue influence upon me and that I took her word for some of the things which I had not actually witnessed myself."

"And what about Dr. Roberts?"

"I think that for another ten thousand dollars, he will find his way clear to reverse his previous testimony."

I bristled. "The rest of you had no ethics to betray, but Dr. Roberts is a physician, and a renegade like that most certainly deserves to be extermin . . ." I stopped.

Freddie rubbed his ear. "If that really bothers you, Uncle Alfred, couldn't you take care of him *after* he gets you out of here?"

He had a point.

It was some three months before I was once again a free man and a rich one.

I saw Freddie off to the West Coast with my best wishes for a long life, my gratitude to the extent of twenty thousand dollars, and the promise that I would remember him in my will—if my death was a natural one.

As I left the airport, I directed my chauffeur to the Seaview Sanitarium.

I found Jason Wicker, my lawyer, already in Dr. Mott's office.

Dr. Mott's interest was represented by Leonard Watson—one of the patients, but nevertheless a crack lawyer in his lucid moments.

Leonard folded his glasses and returned them to his breast coat pocket. "The papers are all in order, Dr. Mott."

Mott looked at me. "Now, are you sure you don't want the controlling interest in Seaview? I could throw in the extra two percent if you'd like."

"No," I said. "Forty-nine percent will be sufficient. I prefer to leave the administration of Seaview in your hands."

"Thank you. And you also realize that . . . well . . . profits here have been going down these last years? You see, a number of our guests seem to have been forgotten by those people who put them in here, and I've been carrying them on the books, so to speak. I simply am *not* going to turn them over to some public institution. You know how cold and impersonal those places are."

"None of our guests need to worry," I said. "They are home."

Dr. Mott signed the necessary papers.

We had a round of drinks and then watched our lawyers leave.

"Will you be wanting a suite here?" Dr. Mott asked.

"No. A single large room will

be sufficient. My old one will do fine, if it is available." I lit a cigar. "I intend to spend almost all of my time here, but now and then I suppose I will have to pop out and attend to the insane world of business."

After I unpacked my suitcases, I went downstairs and outdoors. It was a beautiful afternoon, and I breathed deeply of the flower garden. I had the feeling that I really belonged in Seaview.

But there was still one matter to attend to—Dr. Roberts.

I went in search of Clarke and found him working on a copy of *Nude Descending Stairs*. He was filling in the Number 13's—Prussian blue.

His face brightened when he saw me. "It's good to see you again, Alfred. I thought we'd lost you. Are you staying this time?"

"Yes." I put my hand on his shoulder. "Old friend, let's walk back to the house for a moment."

He blinked. "Oh? The telephone book again?"

I nodded, and we began walking up the terrace.

He was thoughtful as we entered the building. "Alfred," he said, "you've been enjoying my murders vicariously, haven't you?"

"Well . . . yes. I suppose so."

"That's because you don't have the courage . . . I mean the *guts*

to do them yourself?" he prodded.

I was shocked at both the language and the accusation. "I do *too* have guts."

"You do *not*."

"I *do*."

We entered Dr. Mott's office and Clarke went directly to the telephone book. He flipped it open, removed a straight pin from his lapel, and made a stab at the open page. He handed the book to me. "What name did I stick?"

I had the feeling that I was on the wrong side of the dialogue. "Now, Clarke . . ." My eyes narrowed as they focused on the name. "*Theodore L. Clarke*? Isn't that your uncle?"

He nodded. "He's the one really responsible for me being in here."

"But why would you want him dead? I thought you liked Seaview?"

"I do. It's just the principle of the thing. If Uncle Theodore knew that I was enjoying myself he'd have me out of here in thirty minutes. He's that kind of a man." Clarke smiled and seemed to be waiting.

My eyes widened. "You mean you want *me* to . . ."

He nodded.

I thought it over for a full minute and then sighed. "All right, old friend. I will."

And I did.